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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

CAPABILITIES-BASED MILITARY PLANNING: THE MYTH

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"I don't know how man will fight World War III, but I do know how they will fight World War IV -- with sticks and stones." Albert Einstein (1875-1955), German-born American theoretical physicist, philosopher.[1]

"I will ignore all ideas for new works on engines of war, the invention of which has reached its limits and for whose improvements I see no further hope." Sextus Julius Frontinus (35-103 A.D.), Roman soldier, Governor of Britain.[2]

Following the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and subsequent breakup of the Soviet Union only years later, U.S. planners were left with a military force designed to thwart a land-based invasion in Europe, strategically balance former-Soviet nuclear capabilities, and conventionally protect U.S. interests in other regions. The clear communist threat that American forces were designed to deter and, if necessary, fight and win against was subsequently replaced by a world where no distinct danger was readily identifiable. In fact, the U.S. military of 1991 that had successfully fought in Operation DESERT STORM was a legacy force of the Cold War era, although proving more than capable in achieving military objectives in a fairly short amount of time.

Following this conflict, however, the U.S. was left with the task of how to plan for future military operations while drawing down forces in an attempt to control spiraling national debt. The use of a threat-based strategy in a world with no clearly defined emerging threat proved to be worrisome. A new approach began to emerge in formulating U.S. national military strategy - capabilities-based planning, or designing a military with distinct asymmetric abilities that could be used universally in different theaters against diverse foes. However, the current Bush administration's most recent construct is a myth in both theory and application, instead relying on key tenets of threat-based planning. Operating with no currently published National Security Strategy (NSS) and updated National Military Strategy (NMS), defense planners are condemned

to guesswork on military mission definitions, makeup, scale, and transformation goals that greatly increase the potential for a mismatch between ends, ways, means, and risks spread across the full spectrum of military conflict.

Threat-Based Planning: "Out With The Old"

The defense drawdown of the 1990s forced military services to develop capabilities that arguably sought to protect each service's institutional functions and infrastructure while, at the same time, try to structure the force. Threat-based planning, or the practice of countering potential state threat capabilities with U.S. means and ways, was now being driven by attempts to protect force size by focusing on potential adversaries that might be fought simultaneously.

Base Force. Pre-dating the 1990s drawdown, the first Bush administration attempted in 1989 to develop a force structure for the post-Cold War environment while setting a floor for reductions -- in case the Soviet threat failed to fully disintegrate. The goal of this minimum requirement was a 25 percent reduction in force structure and a 10 to 25 percent cut in defense resources through "fair sharing" budget and manpower cutbacks across the services. Determined to avoid past errors encountered during previous post-conflict drawdowns, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney designed a region-focused Base Force to handle a "spectrum of conflict" ranging from peacetime through crisis and regional contingencies up to global war, with the assumption that forces would handle the entire spectrum of conflict.[3] However, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), General Colin Powell, recognized the difficulty in handling more than one Major Regional Conflict (MRC), thus providing the origins for the two-Major Theater War (MTW) standard that would orient further 1990s force planning strategies.

Bottom-Up Review (BUR). Following the DESERT STORM affirmation of a Base Force strategy, which focused on cross-border aggression using large scale invasion tactics of a

mechanized threat, the wearing away of defense resources continued to lead to a pervasive gap between strategy and force structure. Consequently, the BUR aimed to provide "a comprehensive review of the nation's defense strategy, force structure, modernization, infrastructure, and foundations." The BUR picked up where the Base Force left off in force reductions, realizing an overall reduction of approximately one-third of the 1990 force level and reflecting a continuing downward spiral of the defense budget. With the new Clinton administration cutting approximately $60 billion from defense spending to support a policy priority of renewed economic focus, further planned force structure cuts were designed to save a total of $112 billion from 1994 to 1998.[4] Incidentally, this period saw what may be considered an internal push toward capabilities-based planning, as services saw their future viability, force structure, and modernization needs endangered by dwindling resource levels. Regardless, the Clinton-era force structure planned to accomplish four major sets of military objectives, namely (a) to defeat aggressors in MRCs, (b) provide regional deterrence through overseas presence, (c) maintain the ability to conduct smaller-scale interventions, and (d) deter Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) attacks against U.S. interests. The MRC focus drove a variety of options ranging from (1) winning one MRC, (2) winning one while holding in another ("win-hold-win"), and (3) winning two nearly simultaneous MRCs with and without handling Smaller Scale Contingencies (SSC).[5] Choosing the third option of two MRCs without SSCS, however, would prove difficult even under the earlier Base Force structure. Operating with a smaller force near its breaking point, the new strategy was condemned to continually constrained resources, selective modernization and an ever-decreasing readiness.[6] More importantly, the BUR established the planning paradigm for using conflict against North Korea and Iraq as benchmarks in defining the two competing MRCS, a selection that would influence future threat-based planning assumptions for force structure modeling.

1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The QDR sought to provide a strategy-based defense program that could operate within constrained resources. Pushing to rebalance an approximately $250 billion fixed annual defense budget against requirements, reviewers focused on one primary problem arising from the BUR-developed force -- the sustained movement of modernization funding into operations and maintenance accounts.[7] Focus had shifted from a world of threats to one of "strategic opportunity," with the U.S. emerging as the sole superpower and "indispensable partner" for potential allies.[8] Threats categories were broadened, comprised of emerging dangers – "harder to define and more difficult to track" -- ranging from VINM proliferation to the spread of transnational terrorism, organized crime, and illegal drug trafficking. Interestingly, the QDR identified asymmetric attacks against the U.S. homeland as threats. Nevertheless, although the review continued to perpetuate the two-MTW construct as the high end of the conflict spectrum designed to "shape" and "respond," options were severely restricted by limited resources and associated force reductions.[9]

Capabilities-Based Planning: "In With the New"

Countering what had become known as threat-based planning, the emerging methodology for the 21st century military force development became known as capabilities-based planning. Using an approach found fashionable when unambiguous, state-based threats to U.S. interests are hard to nail down, planners use "a liberal dose of military judgment to determine the appropriate mix of required military capabilities."[10] Instead of zeroing in on a specific opposing threat, this theory attempts to concentrate on meeting objectives vice tackling more defined scenarios.

Currently, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has instituted a full court press in pushing capabilities-based planning to the forefront. The 2001 QDR bases the entire defense strategy around this concept, stating that the U.S. cannot clearly define which states or actors will

pose threats to vital interests in the coming decades. The DoD model orients on "how an adversary might fight" instead of who and where an adversary might turn up.[11] Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, in a Defense Planning Guidance news briefing, stressed that this new strategy bases risk evaluation not only on a U.S. ability to handle NMCS, but also to support small scale contingencies while building future long term, technology-based capabilities not specifically focused on exclusive conflict scenarios.[12] Although this approach would initially appear to have merit, a closer examination highlights its shortcomings in both theory and practice.

The Myth Behind the Legend. The theoretical assumptions of capabilities-based planning fall short in a number of ways. First of all, this general approach creates an imbalance between the elements of military strategic development. Ways are severely mismatched with means while planning in a budget-constrained environment. Resource requirements (ways) do not correlate with resources available (means), as the former is not prioritized and the latter not addressed. One would find it difficult to believe that the U.S. Congress would ever write a blank check funding such a proposal, leaving the legislative body the task of prioritizing key programs for DoD planners. The model essentially attempts to meet military and political objectives (ends) without fully addressing ways and risks, to include strategic concept vulnerabilities such as coalition operations and interoperability issues.

Secondly, the ability to determine force scale and size associated with makeup is problematic at best. Pure capabilities-based planning would be like outfitting a toolbox with the latest, most desirable items for supporting the military strategy. But how big of a toolbox should you build? How many of each tool do you need? How many of these tools need external support in getting to the job at hand? How do you judge along the way if you are meeting defense objectives if there exists no metric against which to measure progress? Planning in such

a vacuum does not allow an honest, accurate assessment of true military force requirements when no benchmark conflicts are offered. Military services attempting to support such a plan will find it difficult to budget for unknown quantities of capabilities, potentially resulting in service rivalries that could easily drive resource requirements beyond reach.

Thirdly, the deterrent value of a U.S. capabilities-based force is difficult to determine. Deterrence is based upon perception -- does the potential threat perceive U.S. capability and intent to harm their interests? What are U.S. vulnerabilities and does the threat recognize them?[13] Public statement of planning against a specific threat, such as Iraq or North Korea, offered at least the potential for clearly and forthrightly identifying objects of military planning.

The indeterminable effect on credible alliance-building and support to military agreements is a fourth shortfall. In assessing the capability for defending allies around the globe, it would prove difficult to convince current or potential defense partners of firm U.S. commitment when military planning fails to identify force requirements against a specific, shared threat. In addition, a capabilities-based approach fails to take into account varied allied contributions to overall force potential. For example, one alliance may require little manpower but rely heavily on U.S. technological assistance, while another may have a robust technology base but little in the way of conventional amphibious capacity. Despite Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's 2001 QDR approach of shifting focus beyond a North Korean and Iraqi planning scenario,[14] how does a nation support ongoing alliances and defense agreements without an assessment not only on allied capabilities but also a shared threat or set of threats? A unified commander in the field would be hard-pressed to determine which forces are genuinely available for integration with allied and host nation units.

Finally, the model fails to assign risks associated with each level of military conflict and range of military options as identified by U.S. joint planning documents.[15] Costs and benefits of

specific capabilities are not examined along the spectrum, ranging from Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) to large-scale, sustained combat operations. How can you determine strategic concept vulnerabilities if this area is little addressed in the proposed model? One is forced to assume that conceptual capabilities by themselves will be applicable to all levels of conflict and of such sufficiency that military and linked political objectives may be achieved - a potential stretch if not provided in proper scale and size.

In practice, the current Bush administration has unfortunately done little to reduce the shortcomings of pure capabilities-based planning. The 2001 QDR, aiming to create a "portfolio of capabilities that is robust across the spectrum of possible force requirements, both functional and geographical," begs the question about force sizing when it "calls for identifying, developing, and fielding capabilities that, for *a given level of forces,* would accomplish each mission at *an acceptable level of risk* as established by the National Command Authorities."[16] The Secretary of Defense clearly assumes robust, if not limitless, resources when he states that future U.S. forces are not abandoning the two-MTW formula "to plan for fewer than two" but, contrarily, to achieve "victory across the spectrum of possible conflict."[17] Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz further complicates the issue by declaring that planning is based upon a "more complex formulation" to "win decisively," but that it cannot be described in terms of "3-1/2 or 2-1/2 or 1-1/2."[18]

Practical application into joint strategic development and force structure determination is also at odds with a capabilities-based model. Nebulous, somewhat abstract capabilities are difficult to translate within the U.S. Joint Strategic Planning System (JSPS). The Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP), intended to provide planning guidance to combatant commanders and Service Chiefs "based on current military capabilities"[19] hits a disconnect when translated into operational and concept planning at the combatant command level. An indeterminable force

structure size and scale makes it difficult, if not impossible, to resolve which forces would respond and to where during concurrent military operations.[20] A more measurable, practical approach is therefore needed.

"Transition-Based Planning": A Fine Blend of Tried and True

In order to properly design appropriate force structure size, scale, and capabilities, an approach that balances the strengths and weaknesses of both threat- and capabilities-based planning strategies is required. Therefore, for lack of more descriptive terminology beyond perhaps "strategy-based" and at the risk of marginalizing the language, I offer the concept of "transition-based planning." This construct, while perhaps not unique,[21] combines the best of both threat-based and capabilities-based planning methods.

First, in order to achieve any solution, basic national-level direction must be provided. The lack of a current NSS and updated NMS hinders progress in tying military force structure to national and military objectives. The NSS must define the intended use of military instrument of power so that the NMS can prioritize mission areas throughout the conflict spectrum. Is the military to continue conducting peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions in addition to fighting more traditional force-on-force conflicts? In order to balance means and ways regarding resources, planners must conduct risk assessment along the entire conflict spectrum in accordance with NMS guidance, with roles and missions of active, National Guard, and reserve forces addressed to avoid potentially undesirable duplication of effort. Leadership must focus on areas where relevant risk to national interests is undesirable and where the danger of not addressing those risks is unbearable in order to pinpoint obvious investment targets.

A note of caution is needed here. Strategists must understand that the crisis *du jour* should not be the primary determinant in dictating the character and conduct of future warfare. The

current "war on terrorism" is a primary example, as this operation really only represents a selective slice of the overall conflict pie. A real danger exists in predicating all future capability on the immediate. A clear indication of this negative trend is highlighted in President Bush's December, 2001, Citadel speech by stating that "the conflict in Afghanistan has taught us more about the future of our military than a decade of blue ribbon panels and think-tank symposiums."[22]

Second, the scale and size of future force structure must be based upon the most stressing scenario(s) where risk levels are unacceptable. Models would likely be based upon large scale conflicts with plausible states possessing symmetric as well as asymmetric capabilities. However, this approach does not preclude planning and modeling efforts to handle Small Scale Contingencies (SSC), transnational threats, and MOOTW if determined to be germane military mission. Similarly, deliberate planners must determine whether force structures supporting contingency operations are a subset of those used in larger conflicts. Nevertheless, prioritization of military missions is a must in a resources constrained environment.

Third, policy-makers must readdress how the U.S. defines threats. The paradigm of foreseeing only state actors or regional military alliances as potential threats to U.S. national interests is unhelpful. The emergence of transnational as well as state actors, rising regional powers, entities possessing or attempting to possess and utilize Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), and those displaying the wherewithal and intent to use other asymmetric approaches against U.S. interests must be labeled threats to be countered by U.S. capabilities.

Fourth, the military services must be allowed to transform within prioritized mission and role constraints and bounded by fiscal realities. As highlighted by the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, potential threats will continue to determine what capabilities the

future military force will need.[23] Development of military capacity cannot mature in a vacuum, unlinked to countering specific threats. Although the desire to replace force structure with technological advances is seductive, the number of tools and toolboxes must be a purposeful quantity.

Conclusion

Neither pure threat- nor capabilities-based planning strategies provide an optimal approach to forging a coherent military force for the future. Have we recently adopted capabilities-based planning because it is easier, because we can't accurately predict future threats, or is it simply the current, fashionable, “revolutionary” approach? The same problem that plagued attempts at pure threat-based planning will continue to marginalize any attempts at so-called capabilities-based planning -- limited resources and an accompanying trend to underfund a force expected to accomplish too many, unprioritized missions. Capabilities-based planning can only provide a set of tools for use in future potential conflict but provides little utility in force size and shaping, a key element in a fiscally constrained U.S. bureaucracy.

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[3] Eric V. Larson, David T. Orietsky, and Kristin Leuschner, *Defense Planning in a Decade of Change* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND MR-1387-AF, 2001), p. 9.

[4] lbid, p. 44.

[5] U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on the Bottom-Up Review* (Washington, D.C., October, 1993) available from http://www.fas.org/man/docs/bur/part03.htm; Internet; accessed April 2, 2002. section 3, p. 1.

[6] Larson, p. 55.

[7] Ibid, p. 83.

[8] lbid, p. 85.

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[10] John F Troxell, "Sizing the Force for the 21st Century," *Revising the Two MTW Force Shaping Paradigm, ed.* Steven Metz (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, April, 2001), p. 9.

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[12] Paul Wolfowitz, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, "DoD News Briefing on the Defense Planning Guidance" [article on line] (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense) available http://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/010816Wolfowitz.html; Internet; accessed April 8, 2002, p. 3.

[13] Dr. Ilana Kass, National War College professor, uses the formula T=CxIxV to define threat. Threat (T) is equal to Capabilities (C) times Intent (I) times own Vulnerability (V). If there is no intent, there is no threat. If there is little capability but a positive intent to harm another's interests, then the threat exists. If your vulnerability is reduced, the

threat is reduced. Ilana Kass, Professor of National Security Strategy, National War College. Interview by author, April 11, 2002, Washington, D.C. National War College, Washington, D.C.

[14] Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld states that the new force will continue to meet its commitments to Southwest and Northeast Asia by "maintaining the ability to defeat aggression in two critical areas in overlapping timeframes." *QDR* 2001, pp. 17, 18.

[15] Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States.* Washington, D.C., November 14, 2000. U.S. Department of Defense. Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, p. III-15.

[16] *QDR* 2001, p. 17. Emphasis added by author.

[17] lbid, p. 18.

[18] Wolfowitz, p. 4.

[19] Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Doctrinefor Joint Operations.* Washington, D.C., September 10, 2001. U.S. Department of Defense. Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, p. I-5.

[20] An unnamed senior official the Joint Staff J-5 directorate expressed the apparent frustration with detern3ining how to formalize force sizing within a capabilities-based planning model.

[21] John Troxell offers what he calls a newer "Base Force" construct, allows "elements of both threat-based and capabilities-based planning to be applied, broadens the set of planning cases, and emphasizes combinations of capabilities different from those optimized against the two MTW force sizing construct." John F. Troxell, "Sizing the Force for the 21st Century" *Revising the Two MTW Force Shaping Paradigm,* ed. Steven Metz (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, April, 2001), p. 31.

[22] President George W. Bush, speech at the Citadel, December 11, 2001 [article on line] available from http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/12/20011211-6.html; Internet; accessed April 8, 2002, p. 5.

[23] U.S. Commission on National Security Strategy/21st Century. *Road Map for National Security: Imperative for Change* (Washington, D.C., February 15, 2001) available from http://www.nssg.gov/PhaseIIIFR.pdf; Internet; accessed April 3, 2002, p. 77.